



Can Ultrasound Change Minds and Hearts in Abortion Debate?

With the claim that such measures “do not change hearts,” on June 11 Florida Governor Charlie Crist vetoed a bill that would have required a woman to have an ultrasound before going ahead with an abortion.

In explaining his veto, Crist said that while there are many medical and financial obstacles that the state could erect to prevent a woman from “following through on her constitutionally protected decision to end pregnancy,” ultimately “such measures do not change hearts, which is the only true and effective way to ensure that a new life coming into the world is loved, cherished, and receives that care that is deserved.”



Calling the bill an “inappropriate burden” on a woman seeking an abortion, the Governor declared that personal pro-life views, which he claimed to embrace, “should not result in laws that unwisely expand the role of government and coerce people to obtain medical tests or procedures that are not medically necessary. In this case, such action would violate a woman’s right to privacy.”

In April the Oklahoma legislature successfully overrode a veto by Governor Brad Henry of a similar bill, which requires that women undergo an ultrasound, and that they be presented with the image along with a description of the pre-born baby. While a judge blocked the law pending a hearing in a lawsuit filed by a pair of abortion providers, the conflict reflects the intensity of the current debate over whether ultrasounds are helpful in convincing women to rethink their decision to abort their babies, as many states have enacted similar legislation.

One study conducted in two British Columbia abortion clinics found 73 percent of patients who were offered the opportunity wanted to see ultrasound images of their babies, but 84 percent of the 254 women who saw the images said it did not make their decisions to go ahead with abortion more difficult, and none of the women decided against the procedure.

“The laws don’t work,” Vicki Saporta, president of the National Abortion Federation, told the *New York Times*. “They inappropriately interfere with the patient-doctor relationship, and they don’t respect women’s ability to make informed choices.”

Diane Derzis, who operates an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, where women are required to receive ultrasounds before going through with abortions, told the *Times* that about half of the women coming into her clinic for the procedure opt to view the ultrasound, but “I’ve never had one patient get off the table because she saw what her fetus looks like.”

But pro-life leaders say their own studies show something far different. Bradley Mattes, executive director of Life Issues Institute, a national pro-life educational group, said that a majority of women who



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see ultrasounds of their pre-born babies choose against abortion. “As the saying goes, the camera doesn’t lie,” Mattes wrote recently. “When young women considering an abortion see an ultrasound of their baby, about 80 percent choose to continue the pregnancy. Pro-abortion arguments crumble when they see a beating heart and tiny, growing body.”

Melissa Gunner, an OBGYN physician and director of a pregnancy resource center in Tupelo, Mississippi, encourages ultrasounds as a way of showing pregnant women that what they are carrying is a real, living person. Gunner, who had two abortions herself before having a change of heart, said she strongly feels that women who are given the option of seeing their pre-born babies via an ultrasound will likely choose to keep them. “Twenty years ago, if I had the option to see an ultrasound, I’d have two more children today,” she said.

One Minnesota woman witnessed first-hand the power of an ultra-sound image to change hearts and minds. In January 2009, Bobbie Hallman went to a St. Paul print shop to have some posters made up for an upcoming community pro-life prayer service. Included in the images she brought in to compose the poster were several ultrasound pictures. Soon after handing the pictures to the woman working behind the counter, she realized that they were having a very emotional impact on the woman, who told Hallman that she was struggling with an unplanned pregnancy.

“I could see her eyes well up with tears and she walked away,” Hallman recalled to the Catholic News Service. As the two women worked on the poster, with the images of a 12-week-old pre-born baby in front of them, the young woman broke. “She looked at them individually again and she said, ‘I can’t abort this baby,’” Hallman said. “She said, ‘I was thinking about aborting this baby. I thought it was just a tissue. And, look at this.’ She was pointing to the fingers and the eyes.”

One of the first individuals to use ultrasound to demonstrate the horrible reality of abortion was Bernard Nathanson. As a founder of the National Abortion Rights Action League, Nathanson was a pioneer in the abortion industry who by his own count was responsible for over 75,000 of the procedures. But the advent of ultrasound technology brought him face-to-face with his actions, ultimately leading him to become a leader in the pro-life movement. In 1984, he produced the classic pro-life film *Silent Scream*, which documents the reality of abortion through footage of an ultrasound showing a pre-baby being killed by the procedure.

Like Nathanson, throughout the years many professionals in the abortion industry have experienced a dramatic change of heart after witnessing the reality of abortion via ultrasound. Abby Johnson, who was the director of the Dallas-area Planned Parenthood, experienced a “conversion in my heart” after watching an embryo “crumple” as it was suctioned out of its mother’s womb. Similarly, Joan Appleton, a nurse who had assisted at thousands of abortions, was changed after seeing an ultrasound of a pre-born baby struggling for life. “I saw the baby pull away,” she recalled. “I saw the baby open his mouth.... After the procedure I was shaking, literally.”

If seasoned abortion professionals are dramatically changed by witnessing the reality of abortion through ultrasound, then it stands to reason that the women being subjected to the procedure should have the opportunity to see the reality of their babies in the womb before going through with an abortion. Individuals and groups committed to protecting the unborn say that the personal connection between mother and child is what makes ultrasounds so effective in saving the lives of babies. “To be able to put a face on that baby humanizes this process and really allows the mother to connect,” said Carrie Gordon Earll of Focus on the Family. “Ultrasound is one of the ultimate examples of informed consent because you are seeing what you are giving permission to happen.”



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